

April 24, 2016



"Christian Basics: A New People Known By Love"

Sermon by Rev. Patricia Farris

Revelation 21:1-6

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals.

He will dwell with them;

they will be his peoples,

and God himself will be with them;

he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;

mourning and crying and pain will be no more,

for the first things have passed away.'

And the one who was seated on the throne said, 'See, I am making all things new.' Also he said, 'Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.' Then he said to me, 'It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

John 13:31-35

When he had gone out, Jesus said, 'Now the Son of Man has been glorified, and God has been glorified in him. If God has been glorified in him, God will also glorify him in himself and will glorify him at once. Little children, I am with you only a little longer. You will look for me; and as I said to the Jews so now I say to you, "Where I am going, you cannot come." I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.'

Across the Sundays of Eastertide, we've been exploring some of the basics about what we believe and how we live in light of what happened on that first Easter morning. What is Christian faith, centered in the power of our Resurrected Lord?

We've talked about a faith that is big enough and strong enough to embrace all of who we are—our convictions and our questions, our acclamations, and even our doubts. For our Risen Savior, in the honest light of who we are, says to us: "Peace. Do not let your hearts be troubled....in my Father's house are many dwelling places."

And we've seen that our Easter faith is also about a God we can trust, a resurrected Savior who is our Good Shepherd. We ground our faith, we center our lives, we entrust our care to the promise of the Good Shepherd—Christ who is with us, always, who guides us, shelters us, lifts us, loves us. A good shepherd who protects our going out and our coming in, and in whose house we dwell forever.

Honest faith. Trust. These are basics for us who live as an Easter people.

Pastor Robert added another basic building block of our faith in his sermon a couple weeks ago on evangelism, "grace-based evangelism," he calls it. It's a way of sharing the good news of Christ Jesus purely out of love for the other. He said: "we offer ourselves freely, as a gift of grace, loving our neighbors without any strings attached or any other agendas, because we believe the Good News of God's unbelievable grace for everyone." This is why we are who we are, why we do all that we do.

Now if you notice, Robert has already expanded this basic building block to make it about "us" and not just about "me." You see, across this season of Eastertide, the Resurrected Christ appears to individuals, yes. Is perceived and experienced in the hearts of individual disciples, yes. But even more—the Resurrected Christ is in their midst when those first disciples are gathered together—when they're at the empty tomb, when they're in that room, so frightened. When they're walking on the road to Emmaus. When they're out fishing. When they're together on the beach and he says to them: "Come, and have breakfast."

Through the power and witness of the Resurrected Christ, a new community is formed, a new people is formed. Together, they are to become the new Body of Christ, one with Christ, one with each other, and one in ministry to all the world. A new people known by love.

This is another core building block of Christian faith. Christianity is intensely personal, but not individualistic. Christianity is not a "you-and-me, God" sort of thing—whatever, how ever, where ever. It's about a new people known by love of which we are a part. As the Apostle Paul put it: "Now you are the Body of Christ and individually members of it."

Christian Basics: Honest faith. Trust. Grace-based evangelism. A new people known by love.

So, now...how do we show forth this great, great love of God to a world so hungry for love, and trust, and peace, and hope, hungry for purpose and meaning, and hungry for some good news that says that tomorrow can be better and brighter than today?

Here in this community of faith, we do it already in many, many ways, and as you're hearing, we're starting into a new one this Spring. It's much like things we already do—mission, building shelter, working together, having fun along the way, and finding ourselves changed in the process from the inside out.

This time we're joining together with eight other Westside congregations, including Westwood UMC, Kardia, West LA, the Church in Ocean Park, in a Habitat build in Culver City. The groundwork has been laid, in that we have city approval. A coordinating committee is in place—our representatives are Jill Obery Dodd and Linda Avdul.

It's a big goal—Habitat is an affordable homeownership program and this is an area where, as we all know, affordable housing is a major need. It takes dollars—together our coalition is committed to raising \$150,000—of which over 1/3 has already been raised! —to see this new home become a reality. That's going to take some ingenuity and commitment on our part. But we've done it before and we know we're capable of making big dreams become real. And the best part is, once the building starts, lots of us will be able to have the experience our work teams have of actually being part of the build itself. And of course, the deep joy of knowing that a family will be able know the love of God through a roof over their heads, a safe place to gather together around the table for meals, a yard for beauty and play, a place to sleep.

I want to quote what one of our coordinators, Jill Dodd has said of this project: "the enthusiasm and commitment of the churches working together is a beautiful manifestation of God's love. The gathering, planning, and brainstorming done at these meetings by representatives from the various local churches is heartening I leave with a feeling of accomplishment and hopefulness for what can happen as we extend this vision. If we dare to become involved, we will reap benefits much more than we can imagine, not only by helping families to get homes, but through growth made known only when we leave our comfort level and interact with new and different people."

There is one additional aspect to the potential of the Habitat build that I'd like to lift up today. It's about outreach, about telling our story through our selves as much as through our words and our graphics and our webpage, as important as all those things are. It is that grace-based evangelism and it's something we've already experienced around our Haiti work team as team members have invited friends, neighbors, co-workers—not other churchy people—to learn about our work in Haiti—what we do, and then why we do it. It's the "love" message, but it starts not with words, but with pictures, and with blood, sweat and tears. It's the real deal and that speaks powerfully to folks who either don't know a think about church or don't like what they think they do know.

It's love incarnate that communicates. Love in action. Love visible. Love making a difference in some kid's life, some family's future.

It reminds me of a story about Jesus that's reported in the gospels of both Matthew and Luke. You may remember it. John the Baptist has been put in prison, and he's wondering if Jesus is really the long-awaited Messiah. Is he for real? So John sends two of his disciples to Jesus to ask him: "Are you the one...or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answers, saying: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the sick are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."

Now as then, people want to know if we're for real. So how do we show forth this great, great love of God to a world so hungry for love, and trust, and peace, and hope, hungry for purpose and meaning, and hungry for some good news that says that tomorrow can be better and brighter than today?

Well, we could put up a huge sign in the courtyard that says: "We're all about love. We really mean it." I wonder how many would be persuaded...

Instead, our mission teams, Upward Bound House, this Habitat build—these are tangible ways of demonstrating that we are a people of love. Self-giving love. Grace-filled love. Hammer-wielding, nail-pounding, sweat-dripping love that aims to make a home real for a family. All because of love.

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Thanks be to God for the life-renewing, world-changing love of our Risen Savior and Shepherd, Christ Jesus our Lord.

AMEN